

My Visit to Abbas-Effendi in 1899

By
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Excerpt from Tablet to Margaret B. Peeke,
May 12, 1908:

O thou daughter of the Kingdom!

* * *—Print the account which thou hast
written about thy trip to Acca and spread
it * * *

Excerpt from Tablet to her devoted son and
collaborator, E. C. B. Peeke, Nov. 12, 1909:

*O thou remembrance of that daughter of the
Kingdom!*

* * * Collect the traces of thy mother's
pen, so that they may remain after her. * * *

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
MARGARET B. PEEKE
AND OF
MY BELOVED HUSBAND,
E. C. B. PEEKE.

Dr. Pauline Barton-Peeke.

MY VISIT TO ABBAS-EFFENDI IN 1899.

Less than a decade ago there were not a hundred English-speaking people who were followers of the Báb. At that time a few Persians and other Orientals, with a sprinkling of Europeans, formed the sum total of the believers; today they are innumerable and are found all over the earth as followers of Abbas-Effendi.

"Who is Abbas-Effendi?" asks the reader, and occasionally one who knows will say: "He is the Head of the 'New Religion' that is creeping over the world as silently and surely as the daylight that follows dawn. He is the descendant of a noble Persian family; his influence and teachings extend over the globe from north to south, and from east to west."

A book appeared a few years ago, edited and prefaced by Professor Edward G. Browne of Cambridge University, (Professor Browne occupies the chair of Persian literature and language) who having heard of the "New Religion," went to Persia to see for himself what the basis for it might be. Here, he was directed to Abbas-Effendi, and the year following, met him

and obtained from him much information for the book referred to, which bears the name of "A Traveler's Narrative." Abbas-Effendi thus introduced to the English-speaking people of the world, is today known and loved by a large following of believers. He is a prisoner of the Sultan of Turkey and cannot go beyond the precincts of Syria. His home is in the renowned city of Acca on the shores of the Mediterranean; here he lives in seclusion and simplicity.

On the last day of the year 1898 the writer sailed from New York on board the "Aller" bound for the Orient by way of Gibraltar; it was not for pleasure, nor health, nor sight-seeing that the journey was undertaken, but in the pursuit of a certain knowledge which necessitated the coming in contact with all forms of belief. It was to learn some of the peculiar mystic phases of the East and the practical knowledge said to be understood and practiced there; also to become acquainted with the customs of those ancient sects which seem to have come down from remote ages.

"Be sure and go to Acca; see if there be a genuine Abbas-Effendi and bring us a reliable report from an American standpoint;" was the parting request of a friend. The smile in reply would have shown to the most casual observer that there was no thought or intention of doing anything of the kind. Indeed at that moment

there was less interest in that subject than in any other. I had read "A Traveler's Narrative" with the desire to know the history of the movement, but without a particle of sympathy or living interest in the Bahai teachings. I had met some of its representatives in my own country and instead of being impressed by them, had sensed somewhat of an aversion as a result.

During the following ten days of our journey, the subject recurred again and again to my mind and gradually there was a change of mental attitude; indifference gave place to curiosity; curiosity ended in interest; the impossible grew into the possible and possible became probable, until, by the time we reached Gibraltar, I had made a change of route that took in Acca and Abbas-Effendi. Arriving in Egypt, I wrote a letter to a friend in America, asking for letters of introduction to those in Cairo who could help me in meeting some of the leading Bahais.

After three weeks' trip up the Nile, I returned to Cairo and found the desired letters; to them I owe my visit to Abbas-Effendi. Here in Cairo I met one known as the "Learned Arabian" who gave me in two or three hours all the facts connected with the Bahai movement and also insured me an interview with "The Center Head in Acca."

(Only because so little has been written from an outside standpoint, has it seemed necessary for me to write this account.)

It was not until Baalbec had been visited and Damascus enjoyed that the preparations for the tenting trip to Acca were made. At Beyrout, a famous leader of the Bahais visited me; his presence affected me even more deeply than that of the "Learned Arabian."

We left Beyrout on the ninth of March and rode by the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, camping in tents at night, passing the old cities of Tyre and Sidon; also solitary Mount Carmel and the plains that lie between Beyrout and Acca; the following Sunday we approached the ancient city we sought. As we drew near to it the marvelous history of Acca began to unroll itself before our minds and this strange fact dawned upon us, that from prehistoric times this city had been chosen as a place of conflict; was it perchance a part of the divine plan that the faith of Christendom was here to be decided? Could there have been any ground for their claim in those days? Could a belief have taken hold of the people at that time (as this has done) and spreading throughout all countries necessarily have met with strong opposition and proved a matter of greater importance than the world now dreams? Far back in remote antiquity we find this sea port called Acre, and beyond that, we know nothing. Then we see Ptolemy coming up from Egypt to take it, adding it to his possessions as Ptolemais; a city of grandeur and magnificence—very desirable to be possessed. Some

of the pillars and monuments of that time still exist as proof that history is true. Then the Saracens, made mad with the thought that a foreign power held this gate to the sea, resolved to conquer and retake it and became its rulers. The Saracens held it until the beginning of the twelfth century, when they were driven out by the crusaders of England and France under Richard and Philip, who, with their burning zeal to rescue the sacred land from the unbelievers, sacrificed scores of men to the conquest.

Brittanica gives little significance to the city of Acca, although it was the scene of some of the most notable events in history; of battles in which an hundred thousand men were destroyed in one single encounter. To go to the plains around Acca now, after the passing of centuries, we are told that to dig with our fingers an inch or two beneath the surface of the ground we find human bones. The land is literally covered with human bones—giving a reality to the fact, that in that period, human lives were considered as nothing compared with religious ideas. From this time on the city was called St. Jean de Acre and was held by these believers for a century.

We can imagine that a century of foreign rule how the spirit of the East grew more and more rebellious until they arose and fought for their land and conquered. Here began its decline and from that day to this it has been a scene of alternating rule. Even Napoleon could

not resist the desire to subjugate and possess Acca and after sixty days' siege, was compelled to give it up.

During this time of soliloquy we had been approaching this wonderful city and the afternoon sun was nearing the horizon, when we caught our first clear view of Acca. At the left was an imposing group of white buildings, more palatial than any we had seen in Syria, surrounded with great walls and gardens shaded with beautiful trees; to the right lay the walled city of Acca with its residences and orange groves in the outskirts. Something seemed to say, "This is the place where BAHÁ'O'LLAH lived," and so it proved, but it was closed. The present Head resides in a pasha's house in the city. At four o'clock our tents were pitched outside the walls and a messenger was sent to ask if Abbas-Effendi would receive those not of his faith.

We had not long to wait, perhaps half an hour, but it was a time of great suspense. Had we known what we now know, letters would have been sent from Egypt, making an appointment before our arrival. The messenger returned with the answer that an audience would be given us that evening at eight o'clock.

Only in the Orient could it be understood or realized what that meeting meant.

The night was most dark; we were accompanied by our own guide and interpreter, a soldier and a man carrying a lantern; and as we

threaded our way along narrow streets, groups of men watching us were standing under arches that opened into a court-yard, where there were many other soldiers. All saluted us as we passed them to gain access to a long flight of stairs built on the outside of the house. We felt that this wonderful night would ever be a memorable one in our lives.

"You cannot enter" said one of these soldiers to our faithful dragoman who had never yet left us since entering our service.

"Then I will stand by the door" was his meek reply, as he followed us up the long flight of stairs to the door of the audience room.

The door which opened to admit us into the presence of the man, who is today one of the marked figures of the world, disclosed a long bare room, scantily furnished. On entering the room visitors from America were seated near the door, together with ladies and soldiers, converts from the Mohammedan to the Christian faith. From the other side of this long room, we saw a figure rise and advance to meet us.

The motion was almost like gliding, so smooth was it, and as he drew nearer, we noticed the mouse-colored gown he wore with a turban to match, and there stood before us One who was the personification of all gentleness and meekness, and yet a sublime dignity rested upon him which we had never seen in others of the same faith, unusual in type as they were. He ap-

proached with extended hands, as if meeting friends and followers and then led us to seats at the upper end of the long room, motioning us to sit at his right hand. He ordered tea, which was served by a gentleman placing tiny round tables before each one and proceeded to give us the fragrant cup of tea. So far as we could notice not a glance had been directed toward us, though the visitors from America, knowing me to be a non-believer, watched with keen interest this kindly courtesy Abbas-Effendi extended me. We had come prepared to hear the history of the Báb who was the forerunner of the Great Manifestation; the sufferings of the martyrs; of his long imprisonment, also that of his father's before him; but to our great astonishment he began to speak of the "Grand Architect of the Universe, about the Laws of Creation and Preservation," and for the first time, he looked up as a question was asked, answering it by still adhering to the same line of thought. I could find no question to ask on the most important subject of all; its place in history and the fulfillment of prophecy. Our knowledge was absolutely nothing; how we did ransack our memories for some hint from Prof. Browne's book to help us out of our dilemma, but none came, and, as if in response to this state of our minds, he avoided altogether any allusion to his own work or the significance of His Father's Manifestation.

Looking down the room while we were sip-

ping our tea, what was our surprise to see our dragoman, Joseph, demurely sitting inside near the door with a countenance as unreadable as a sphinx. Abbas-Effendi also noticing him, motioned to him to come up nearer, and placed him at his left, saying in Arabic, that he would be glad to have him act as assistant interpreter. A cup of tea was also brought to Joseph. The conversation continued upon the plan of the Divine Being, who from the beginning, when the stars were sent forth into their places, till the present time, never changed a detail of what was in His plan. Worlds, empires, men and angels all had their station, which had been theirs from the ideal, first formed in the Mind of God. There had been no mistakes; there had been no retrogression. It was when ages had rolled by that man could see what had been accomplished and know that there was no possibility of frustrating even the smallest fraction of the Law. The great nations of the past had done the little part that was their work to do and the figure they completed in the tapestry of Life could never have been accomplished by any other peoples.

So long as the world was under the Law of the Mineral, it could not know God except as it saw Him in the face of stone, but, as centuries and eons passed, there awoke in the creature, man, a feeling that he had some relation to this Being, who was holding in His hand the sun, moon and stars; nay even more than all, the thinking crea-

ture who was the king of His creatures. It was then that the first Manifestation of God (of record) was seen in the Moses of the mountain, and the Law received from the Burning Bush. Then came the Prophets, with the inspiration of the Spirit, telling what was to come in the "latter days." There remained much that could not be explained even after Jesus the Christ had come, and had been the fulfillment of a great deal which was ended by His work. With every new Revelation there has come a clearer meaning of man's relation to the First Cause until the time grew near when the dark places would be made Light, and the unknown understood.

When the rim of a new moon comes into view, if we had never seen it before, we would think it could be no greater, but night after night it grows from the crescent to the gibbous, and from that to the full moon, so also the Light of Truth had come by degrees, and when the fullness of the whole could be seen, it would be the same Light that had shown in the crescent, in the gibbous, and in the full moon, but differing only in degree.

At ten o'clock we rose to take our leave, and while thanking our host for his kindness in granting us so lengthy an interview, he said in that soft, but commanding voice, which no one would think of resisting, "I shall be glad to see you again tomorrow morning at nine o'clock."

Could we be dreaming? Were we to be so favored as to have another interview? Going forth into the darkness, to be escorted back to our tents, we felt a great interest awoken in this wonderful personality, so meek, yet so majestic; commanding, and yet so humble.

When retracing our steps through the same arches and courts as before, we found the soldiers of the Sultan, sitting on the walls over-looking our tents, evidently watching our movements. They were playing on the instruments of their country, soft, sensuous, dreamy music, that seemed to belong to the lonely, lovely night, to the quaint place and our new experiences. The skies of Syria are very blue; the stars seem very near; poetry breathes in every breeze; and when we finally entered our tents and closed the door, we seated ourselves on our beds and gave a sigh of delight, perhaps one of religious longing and fervor. "Do you know E—" I said at last, "I am surprised and very much impressed; who ever could think that Abbas-Effendi would be like that? Think of it! We have talked fully two hours and he never once spoke of those things one would expect to be uppermost in his mind. Where could we find, in the length and breadth of America, a man devoted to one pursuit and when meeting a stranger, would talk for hours and make no mention of it? He did not even ask whether or not the Movement was progressing in our own land; he made no inquiry as

to the teacher who had first brought it into notice there; most astonishing of all is the fact that he did not try to tell us of how superior it was to all other Religions, nor did he speak of his Father, the Great Manifestation or of himself as his Father's representative. One cannot but marvel at the greatness of his universal knowledge; the meekness of his character; the majesty of his humility."

Going to meet him in the morning, my friend, thinking it would be a fine opportunity to take views of the palace of the Great Manifestation, took an attendant with her on horseback and started for the palace, planning to meet me later at the room where we had met Abbas-Effendi in our first interview.

He had not yet appeared, but we found our friends and some of the ladies we had seen the night before and while we were talking together Abbas-Effendi approached towards us. In a moment, every sound was hushed, as if in the presence of some divine person. He held in his hand three stalks of heliotrope-colored stock-gilly flowers, two of which he presented to me, keeping the third in his hand while he led me up to the same seat he had given me the previous evening.

"I should like to begin with the last question you asked me," he said as soon as we were seated. "I should have answered it a little more fully." He began at that point, continuing as

he had in our first conversation until it was twelve o'clock. Then my friend came in, and he handed her the other flower. He bade us adieu, and gave to each a precious message that must linger in our memory so long as life lasts. This was the culmination of our search after this new sect scarcely known in our own country and yet is believed by many to have come as the sign of the full moon, of which nothing can be greater; a summing up of those who are the Avatars of the race; the blessings to mankind. We felt that we had seen the greatest that could be known on the earth at this time, and though we might not believe every claim their followers set forth, we surely had been blessed in the privilege of meeting him. We went to Jerico, to Jerusalem and the places connected with the earth life of Jesus Christ, and but little moment of thought was given to that scene which we left in Acca. It was only when on the deck of the steamer, sailing to Marseilles, that we again took up the thread of the Bahai doctrine. We read "The Life of Abbas-Effendi" (a recent work by Mr. Phelps of New York) which impresses the reader with the daily life of this man, who has a place in the religious history of this new cycle.

From the day I met him in Acca he has steadily grown in my mind as one who in the race is a figure-head of religious progress. A correspondence with him has extended over a

period of seven years; the truth of his claims and teachings has a foundation which cannot be overthrown by the mere opinion of man. If it were a creed upon which the Bahai Revelation rested, then it might fail, but it is "living the life;" it is the maturity of the Christ-life that was begun in Nazareth two thousand years ago. It has come when all nations are looking for the appearing of One who was prophesied to come; it has come in the east, and in spite of torture to its followers the Light had spread to the west with a rapidity that has never been equaled.

It cannot be a matter of indifference to any soul who thinks of the spiritual trend of events, who reads the history of the past, who knows that the race has not yet reached its maturity, to ask the meaning of the movement that today has spread to every country, without noise of the press, or methods of propaganda, or the fame of great works, but simply by the life of its members and more than all, by the life of Abbas-Effendi, who has taken the station of the "Centre of the Covenant" (Abdul-Baha, the servant of God).

There surely was nothing in the bare room in which this Centre received us, nor in any attempt to exhibit healing or miraculous powers to prove the truth of his position. He did not even mention the Great Manifestation, whom he represented, in whom his hopes and adoration are centered, but with the simplest words, he ex-

pounded the revelation of God in nature and in man, from a wonderfully impersonal standpoint.

Did he not wish us to believe in that which to him was of the greatest importance in the world, and for which thousands have died by the most cruel tortures? Was it a matter of indifference whether we took back to America from an outsider's standpoint a testimony of this truth that the Avatar, for the twentieth century, in reality, had come to fulfill the prophecies never yet fulfilled? With the calmness of one who can afford to await the results, and with the humility of one who knows his station in the work, both in this world and in that invisible one (the Cause-world), he made no effort to convince or to affect his hearers. All this, however, did not come at once to my mind, but has been the outgrowth of the years that have intervened between that day in Acca and this in which I am writing these impressions which have been solicited. When thinking of the generous amount of time he had given me, I felt I must write a letter expressing thanks and my appreciation, and on the way from Alexandria to Marseilles I did so; then dismissed the subject from my mind. I had taken care of the flower he had given me and pressed it, bringing it to those who would value and cherish anything that had touched his hands. On my return to New York, many of the Bahais called to know of the impression made by my visit, but I could only say that it was impos-

sible to formulate into words the effect upon me, for I had gone there unprepared for anything, except to make a report to my dear friend that I had found Abbas-Effendi at Acca, a most humble and great man, great in his universality and perfect in humility. One day, a most exquisite letter written in Persian, with a translation into English, came to me and I felt as never before when reading those words which vibrated through me as would music from the chords of a grand organ, nor could I understand the power that could cross the seas and oceans, and give me a sense of such nearness and spiritual longing. From that time to the present moment, Abbas-Effendi, or "Abdul-Baha" has been to me an ever growing mystery, his letters have been filled with a spirit so great and holy that its equal cannot be found unless it be in the epistles of the New Testament. Only now can I analyze that feeling which has taken so deep a root in my heart and soul.

In Acca, on the shores of the Mediterranean, dwells a man who is the center of thought of all the lands, whom the noblemen, the great, the wealthy, rejoice to meet even for one day. He is a comforter to the poor and unfortunate and a healer to the sick.

His home is a prison, where He has been placed on account of His dreaded influence upon the people of that land. He has the freedom of

the city and through the goodness of God, the Sultan of Turkey has now given Him permission to visit the holy resting-place of His Father, just outside the city of Acca. He spends much time in writing tablets to His followers and in preparing, for future circulation, the wonderful utterances of His Father. He never allows Himself the barest comforts that the ordinary working man of America would think a necessity. He will not own two garments, for He gives daily to the poor, often sharing His meal and that of His family with some hungry man, woman or family. He sleeps but little and is up at all hours writing, praying or instructing a devoted one who may be leaving for some foreign country. He never speaks or thinks of Himself, the one thought and aim of His life is to do the work that He has come to perform. The best exponents of this Revelation are met in the land where they have been called to suffer martyrdom for their faith.

“Do you believe Abdul-Baha is the one who is to fulfill the second coming of the Christ?” say many who ask me of Him, and I reply. “He has frequently written in His letters to me of the Christ, expressing more love and with greater reverence than we, who have been followers of Jesus for generations, and Abbas-Effendi makes no such claims for Himself.”

Since the first history of man was given in the Bible, there has not failed to come an Avatar at

the beginning of every two-thousand year cycle, and for many a decade it has been predicted that another cyclic change has come and that the next zodiacal representative is prophesied to appear now at this time. The coming of an Avatar has not been looked for in one land only, but in all lands; among the prophets of the western Indians, as well as in those lands where the main object of life is to study deeply the prophecies of all the different sacred books. Everywhere, in the predictions of all the sacred books, the time has been set as the present for this Great Appearance.

You ask if this be true, how and by what signs are we to know Him when He comes? Could wealth and magnificence be the outward symbol of the Manifestation of God? There has been in the past, the wealth of the Indies, of Croesus, and nothing is left to prove their divinity. Would it be by the gift of healing? The great Physician was the healer of body and soul. Could it be by prophetic gifts and by miracles? No one of these signs have ever proved divinity. Must it not be then by the fulfillment of prophecy, something different from the ordinary, and yet having the same relation to the former dispensations, as, for instance, that which the full moon has to the slender rim of the crescent?

Were there no telegraph today as in those days when Jesus walked through Galilee, and no press to spread the tidings of every occurrence in

the countries of this earth, we should never have known of this Manifestation and it would now be as then, that it must spread from one to another, by word of mouth, until the world would know the gladness of this day.

I went there to please a friend; I knew nothing about this Truth which has now permeated my being to an extent that is astonishing. Having seen the failure of creeds to make lives beautiful and practical, I admit that the creed of this, the new, blossoming from the old-time Christianity, was unimportant to me.

The pleasure of telling this story, to those who asked of my visit to Acca, rejoices me when they feel a glow of warmth in their hearts towards this man of whom I am writing. He teaches a doctrine which takes His followers among the poor and the sick, even when in danger of their lives, making them forget self. Their faith and the new "Name" is but another lisp of the soul to its Father. They take nothing on mere belief. When the Bahais have tried the teachings for themselves and have found sudden and sure deliverance come to them, it needs no words of mine to urge them to be "Steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the works of the Lord." It does not take from the glory of the New Moon to know that the Full Moon has come.

ONE STEP BEYOND.

Margaret B. Peeke.

Whether my future will be dark or bright
I do not know,
I only ask for enough light
While here below,
Always the step beyond to plainly see,
Knowing that then
The next will come to me.

What matters it though friends I hold most dear
Are called away
To fill another sphere?
Both they and I
Are part of one great plan,
The everlasting
Upward growth of man.

What difference can it make to you or me
Whether in this
World or eternity
The next few years are spent?
Nearer to Him let us but strive to grow,
Looking not backward on the things below
But upward, ever on God's will intent.

Whatever comes of good, by us will stay;
False doctrines,
Though fair, will surely slip away.
What matters how
The summit we have gained,
Since far below
Us lies the barren plain?

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